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United States Constitution Celebration

1787 1937

The Story of Independence Hall

Pennsylvania Historical Commission
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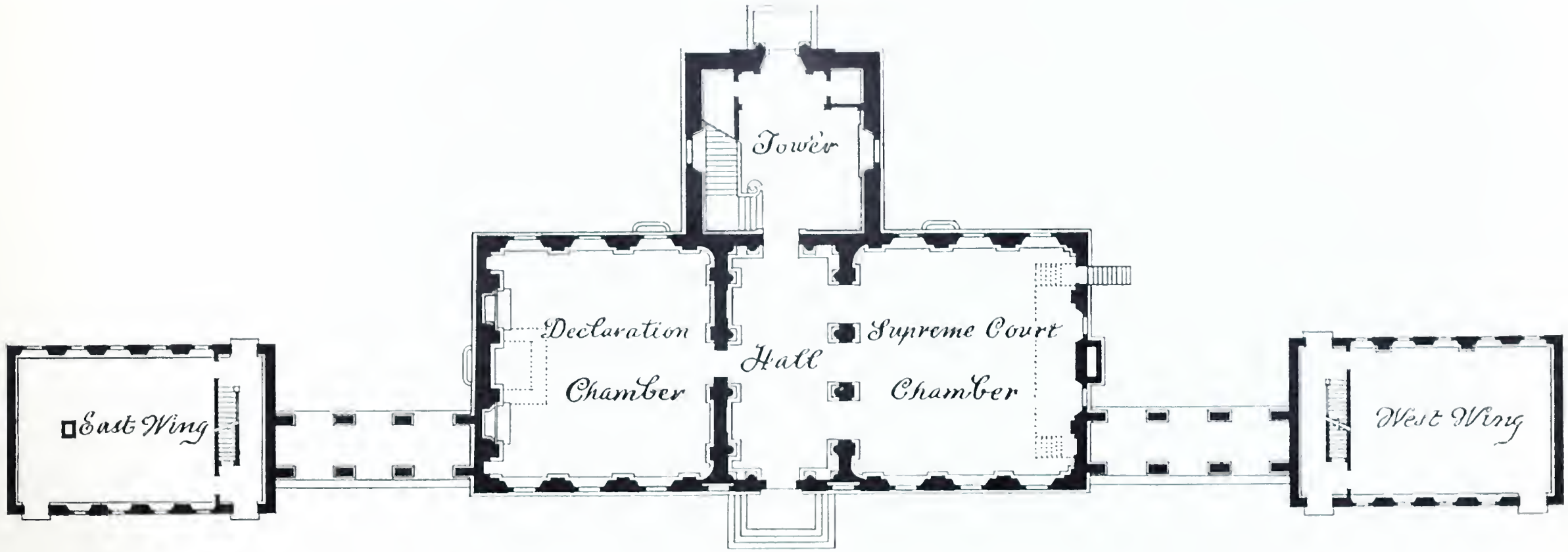

Independence Hall

1787 — Main Floor Plan — 1937

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United States Constitution Celebration

Pennsylvania Historical Commission

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IN HONOR of the 150th Anniversary of the Signing of the Constitution of the United States of America, the Pennsylvania Historical Commission in cooperation with the Museum Extension Project of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has prepared this pamphlet on Independence Hall. It tells the history and describes in detail the architectural features of that historic building where, on September 17, 1787, the Constitution was signed.

GEORGE H. EARLE

Governor of Pennsylvania

A Brief Sketch of
Pennsylvania's First State House
now
The Nation's Independence Hall

SHORTLY after his arrival in Pennsylvania, William Penn, the great Quaker statesman and Proprietary, called an Assembly of chosen delegates to meet at Upland, now Chester, December 4, 1682, to confer on his Frame of Government for Pennsylvania and the Laws agreed upon before he left England.[1] This Frame, or Charter, provided for a Governor, a Provincial Council, an elective assembly, fundamental liberties to the individual and the franchise to all freemen of the Province who believed in God.

This meeting of the First Assembly lasted three days. The Frame, or the Great Law of Pennsylvania, of twenty-four Articles and forty Laws was read, frankly discussed and accepted, with "general naturalization for strangers," and the annexation of the three Lower Counties, New Castle, Kent and Sussex, now the State of Delaware.[2]

The second Assembly met at Philadelphia, March 12, 1683, probably in the "boarded Meeting House," which, in 1684, was replaced by the Bank Meeting House, Front Street above Arch. Here the Assembly continued to hold its meetings for some years, probably until 1695.[3] This Assembly, which consisted of nine delegates from the then counties of Philadelphia, Chester, Bucks, New Castle, Kent, and Sussex, considered anew the original Charter or Frame, which had, "upon experience proved inconvenient, if not impractical in some Parts, and particularly in the too great Numbers of Representatives returnable to the Provincial Council and Assembly," the result being that a second Charter with Amendments to the first was passed April 2, 1683.[4]

The meeting places of the Assembly were numerous, first in one "great-house" and then in another. Its memorable sessions of 1701 were held at Robert Whitpain's on the east side of Front Street between Walnut and Spruce Streets, at that time owned by Joseph Shippen. There and then was framed the Great Charter of 1701. By its terms, an Assembly was to be chosen yearly of four persons from each county, with all the self-governing privileges of the English House of Commons and power to propound laws instead of merely to amend; two-thirds of the delegates present to constitute a quorum of the whole; the Council to be nominated by the Governor instead of chosen by the people. This Charter was totally rejected by the delegates from the three Lower Counties, which, under the name of The Territories, had been annexed to the Province. A breach ensued terminating in a complete separation. The Lower Counties and the Province ever after maintained Assemblies independent of each other, as provided for by the first Charter, in case of disagreement.

After other temporary homes, the County Court House, on High Street near Second, offered possibilities of permanence in 1707, but in 1728, the Assembly became restive and petitioned the Governor and Council to make provision "for a meeting place more convenient for the dispatch of business, because of indecencies used toward members of Assembly."[5] The petition was not then granted and the Assembly moved to the house of Captain Anthony Morris on Second Street below Walnut.

As counties increased in the Province, so did the Assemblymen, and the need for official quarters became imperative. On May 11, 1729, an act was passed with provisions to this end: £2000 were to be paid "to Andrew Hamilton, John Kearsley and Thomas Lawrence trustees, per order of the Assembly, for building a Stadthouse," and these three gentlemen were named a Committee to draw plans.[6]

The first purchase of ground was made October 15, 1730, by William Allen, a prominent merchant and later Mayor of Philadelphia, to which plot there were subsequent additions. At the session of August 11, 1732, the House "Resolved that Andrew Hamilton, John Kearsley, and Thomas Lawrence pay to William Allen the purchase money for the ground he bought of Levin Hill" on Chestnut Street for a State House. At this time "Mr. Speaker (Andrew Hamilton) produced a draught of the State House containing plans and elevation of that building, which being viewed and examined by several members was approved by the House."[7] Sometime previous, the Building Committee submitted plans, and that of Andrew Hamilton, by vote of Mr. Lawrence, was chosen. The original, a rough-draft on parchment, is in the collection of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

Ground for the new building was broken in 1732, but the work progressed slowly. Dr. Kearsley, with laurels fresh from his success as architect of Christ Church, had positive views as to what and where the new State House should be, and no doubt some friction occurred between the two good Scotch gentlemen, with resultant delays. Urging press of other business, Speaker Hamilton asked to be relieved of the Chairmanship and Committee duties. Naturally, the Assembly refused to relinquish his services and by way of appreciation offered compensation for the arduous labors involved.[8] From this point the work moved rapidly.

The main or central building was designed to accommodate the Assembly, the Supreme Court, and the Governor's Council. The October session of the 1736 Legislature was the first to occupy the Assembly Chamber, although it was not completed until three years later. The long room or Banqueting Hall was also in a state of use in 1736, when, on September 30th, Mayor Allen gave "the most elegant entertainment ever made in these parts."[9]

The Assembly next ordered the completion of the Judicial Chamber in the identical decorative style of the Assembly Room. In 1741, the stairway leading to the second story was finished, as were the Banqueting Hall and its ante-room. The other room on the second floor, known as the Council Chamber, was not ready for occupancy until 1747.

As early as 1737 the Assembly was conscious of the necessity for offices in which public records and papers could be housed. Accordingly, the two wings were erected. These are the two two-story buildings connected with the main building by open arcades.

In February, 1750, the Assembly ordered that "a building should be erected on the south side of the State House to contain a staircase with suitable place for having a bell." This was the tower topped with a wooden steeple.

While this work was in progress, Isaac Norris, Thomas Leech, and Edward Warner were authorized to order a bell for the new State House from Mr. Robert Charles, the Colonial Agent of the Province, who resided in London. The bell, Mr. Charles was informed, was to weigh about 2,000 pounds and to have cast upon it the following inscriptions:

> "By Order of the Assembly of the Province of Pennsylvania, for the State House in the City of Philadelphia, 1752"

and underneath—

> "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants thereof. Lev. XXV. 10."

The bell was cast by Thomas Lister, of Whitechapel, London. It arrived in Philadelphia toward the end of August, 1752, and was immediately hung on trusses in the State House yard to try the sound before raising it to the tower.

The bell was in service for a month only when it was cracked by a stroke of its clapper. It was twice recast by Pass and Stow of Philadelphia. In the first recasting the same metal was used, but with the addition of an ounce and one-half of American copper to the pound of the old bell metal, in order that the bell might be less brittle. However, the bell again proved unsatisfactory and was recast a second time, more copper being utilized. The same form and lettering were preserved with the substitution of the names of the founders, the place, and the year of recasting.

Such is the relic the visitor looks upon today. It gave gratifying service until July 8, 1835, when it, too, cracked while being tolled in memory of the noted Chief Justice Marshall, who died at this time.

The most important event associated with the State House, was the Signing of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, and the tolling of the bell proclaiming it to all people, July 8, 1776. This changed the name of the State House to Independence Hall and gave birth to a nation. The Pennsylvania Signers to that immortal document were: Benjamin Franklin, Robert Morris, Benjamin Rush, George Ross, John Morton, George Clymer, James Smith, George Taylor, and James Wilson, the largest number from any of the thirteen colonies.

Among other notable events that have taken place at Independence Hall the following are of especial interest:

The gentlemen of Philadelphia gave a dinner in the great Banqueting Hall to the Members of the Continental Congress, 1774.

On June 16, 1775, George Washington accepted his appointment as General of the Continental Army in the present Declaration Chamber.

The convention to form a new constitution for Pennsylvania met in the Supreme Court Chamber July 15, 1776.

On July 9, 1778, the Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union between the States were signed in the Declaration Chamber by eight States.

The Federal Convention to frame a constitution for the United States met in the same room from May 25 to September 17, 1787.[10] The Pennsylvania delegates, the most brilliant group of the twelve participating States, were: Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Mifflin, Robert Morris, Thomas FitzSimons, George Clymer, Jared Ingersoll, Gouverneur Morris, and James Wilson, the latter the brains of the delegation, if not of the convention.[11] The original draft of the Constitution is in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

In 1824, General Lafayette visited Philadelphia and was given a reception in the Declaration Chamber.

The body of Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth President of the United States, lay in state in Independence Hall in 1865.

The City of Philadelphia purchased Independence Hall from the Commonwealth in 1816, and converted it into a museum of historical relics.

Architecture

The cultural background of the colonial people was largely English. With communication increasing between the old country and the new, England, naturally, determined the style of architecture in colonial America. Moreover, Sir Christopher Wren's achievement in his plan for the re-building of London after the great fire of 1666, had directed English thought to his designs for public buildings, civic, collegiate, and church. Hence, many were the colonial attempts to catch the spirit of his genius, not so much from his great masterpiece, St. Paul's, as from the simpler examples of his work in London, other English towns and seats of learning. Of this, Christ Church, Philadelphia, is a notable illustration.

The State House of Pennsylvania, later Independence Hall, is an abiding memorial to Mr. Hamilton's genius. Though many famous buildings in colonial America were designed by amateur architects, this, indubitably, is the most excellent administrative building erected during that period.

Mr. Hamilton's sense of design, mass, and proportion produced a stately, symmetrical edifice that still presents a gratifying content from every side. It symbolizes the tranquillity of mind and steadfastness of purpose that characterized those resolute patriots who made it famous.

The deep red brick walls of the building, beautifully mellowed by time and weather, are complemented by the bluish marble and white woodwork trimmings. The north front has a single, deeply recessed doorway, with eight broad windows on the lower story and an unbroken range of nine windows on the second story. Along the entire length of the roof of the building runs a white balustrade which is set where the pitch of the roof breaks into a much flattened gambrel to form a deck.

The Independence Hall Square facade is overshadowed by the splendid square bell tower, the entire height of which stands outside but adjoining the walls of the main building. The two lower stories conform to the construc-

tion of the main building and the cornice of the latter is effectively carried around the tower. This rises to an additional height of two stories of brick construction, the lower Doric, the upper Ionic. Above this level the construction of the clock stage of the tower is of white painted wood, one story with Corinthian pilasters, another balustraded. The tower continues to rise in a four-sided diminution to the octagonal, open-arched belfry and superstructure.

This steeple is a restoration, the work of William Strickland, and was completed in 1828. The original was removed in 1781.

The main entrance is situated in the base of the tower; a stately pillared doorway in the Roman Doric order with double four-panel doors and a magnificent Palladian window. The doorway opens into a lofty, brick-paved hall, the style of which is Ionic and has a heavy cornice with carved modillions. The windows are embrasured with broad sills supported by beautifully hand-tooled corbels.

The entrance is a fitting frame for the broad staircase which has been called the finest in America. The white wooden balustrades with the mahogany handrail and the dark stairs combine to make this staircase a thing of beauty as well as utility.

The central hall, a truly majestic room which extends through the building from the Chestnut Street entrance, is remarkable for its fluted columns which rest on broad pedestals and which, in turn, support an entablature enriched with beautifully hand-carved moldings.

To the east lies the most famous room in America, the Declaration Chamber. Opposite its entrance is a small platform on which stands the presiding officer's desk. Behind this is an elaborate frame with exquisite carved moldings within which is a smaller frame containing a facsimile of the Declaration of Independence. Two arched fireplaces are situated on either side of the frame.

A fitting way to describe this room is to say that it is historically hallowed, for most of the furniture that was in service during "the times that tried men's souls" still remains in it: the table and high-backed Chippendale chair of mahogany used by the presidents of the Continental Congress and occupied by John Hancock at the signing of the Declaration of Independence; the table, with the historic silver inkstand set complete, its quill box and shaker, and fourteen of the original chairs used by the various delegates.[12] On the walls hang portraits of forty-five of the fifty-six signers, also a portrait of George Washington by Rembrandt Peale.

To the right of the hall three large arches between engaged columns open into the Supreme Court Chamber. In it, however, pilasters take the place of the engaged columns. Against the west wall is a raised platform for the judges, with flights of steps on either side and of later construction, intended to indicate the original conditions. In size, architecture, and decorative effect the room corresponds to the Declaration Chamber.[13]

In this room the convention to form the new constitution for Pennsylvania met on July 15, 1776.

On the second floor there is a great Banqueting Hall which runs the entire length of the building on the Chestnut Street side, with a range of nine windows and an elaborate fireplace at each end. Early in the nineteenth century Charles Wilson Peale obtained a grant to place his museum in this room. The collection of curiosities remained until 1826.

Conclusion

It is true that each of the thirteen colonies has its revered state buildings, that every country has its sacred hearth stones, yet the United States, Pennsylvania, and Philadelphia stand honored in the joint possession of Independence Hall.

This brief sketch but stresses the highlights in the story of that State House which, because of the momentous occurrences within its walls, has become Independence Hall, the cradle of American Liberty. Its early history parallels that of colonial Pennsylvania from the landing of William Penn to the ratification of the United States Constitution. The course of civil liberty and human dignity he charted was resolutely followed by those stalwart men who, by election, sat in its halls and framed two of the noblest documents of all time.

In conclusion, to quote the words of an eminent Pennsylvanian, Honorable James M. Beck:

> "It remains for us to make the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania worthy of the great ideals of its immortal founder . . . his holy experiment remains far from its realization, but we will always have the inspiration of his leadership. As unceasing as the rivers of Pennsylvania flow in silent majesty to the sea, so the example of Penn will remain as a beneficent influence to all succeeding generations of a Commonwealth which still bears, and will forever bear, the beautiful name, 'Pennsylvania'."[14]

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